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Review of *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*. Michael Kazin. Reviewed by Kim Phillips-Fein.

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for consumers, they respond that as a society, we are already paying those higher prices indirectly, as a result of the social cost of low-wage jobs—including poor health outcomes for workers and their children, and the loss of human potential when children are raised in impoverished households.

In the current political context, improving job quality will be an uphill struggle and the authors are well aware of the obstacles that will need to be surmounted. It is not so much that their prescriptions will automatically lead to success, but that the alternative, which is to do nothing at all to improve the prospects of the working poor, is totally unacceptable.

Mary Huff Stevenson, *Emerita, Economics Department,
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Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (2011). Knopf, \$27.95 (hardcover), \$16.00 (paperback).

For many books about the history of the American left, the implicit questions are always about the reasons for its failure. Why are Americans so conservative? Why are traditions of social reform so much weaker in America than elsewhere? Why has the left been so frail? Scholars have addressed these questions by looking at the strength of business, the limits of the state, and most of all, the myriad strategic and intellectual blunders of leftists themselves. Michael Kazin, in *American Dreamers*, turns the question itself upside down. The American left, he suggests, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. True, it has never held state power, or even managed to build a stable political party. It has been reviled and demonized, and it has never claimed the faith of more than a small minority. Yet Kazin—who clearly identifies, albeit in an ambivalent way, with those dreamers he chronicles—remains hopeful, for he argues that the real strength of the left has been its ability to shift the horizons of the American cultural imagination. Radicals may not have drawn people to their political parties, but they were able to create a “culture of rebellion,” which could “articulate outrage about the state of the world and the longing for a different one” (p. xiv). This, in turn, helped to change political life, as it shifted the mainstream of national opinion. American

political history, Kazin argues, could not have been the same without the left.

The argument begs the question: What is the left? Kazin suggests that, properly understood, the "left" consists of those who believe in a "radically egalitarian" reordering of society (p. xiv). For Kazin, these include abolitionists, anarchists, socialists, bohemians, the Communist Party (especially in the 1930s), and the New Left, including feminists, gay and lesbian activists, and environmentalists. All these, he suggests, were able to exert influence on American culture that wildly outstripped their political support. Even for people who would never become activists or even identify with these movements, they were able to reshape the very way that the ideals of the nation were perceived. For example, the abolitionist movement of antebellum America was never able to gain political power, but it was able to force not only the abolition of slavery but a host of questions about personal liberty into political debate. The Communist Party never had a mass membership, but the left in the 1930s was able to "advance a new common sense about larger social and moral questions: Who were the people? How did they want the nation to change?" (p. 178). The utopian commitments of the left and its willingness to leap into an unknown future and to imagine profound social change, accounts for its cultural influence, even as this radicalism limited the abilities of leftists to make alliances or to achieve political success. In a sense, the cultural influence of the left is intimately connected to the difficulties they faced building political organizations. As Kazin says of American Communists in the 1930s in a somewhat different context, "Their success was also their failure" (p. 208).

American Dreamers is intended to bring the history of these figures and movements to a broad popular audience, to readers who may wonder why anyone would ever care about people who seem at first glance to lie so far outside the political mainstream. As such, it is a narrative that may at times frustrate scholars, even those who are sympathetic to its political project. It is hard to bring all these different characters together into a single overarching thesis, while doing justice to the subtleties of the various different movements to which they belonged. The book focuses primarily on individual radical leaders—Frederick Douglass, Eugene Debs, Woody Guthrie,

Paul Robeson—rather than on the less famous activists and participants. In addition, those who are interested primarily in the study of social welfare policy may feel that Kazin's emphasis on culture is misplaced. Finally, Kazin does not say too much about the obstacles, resistance and repression that have also been major parts of the history of the left. At the end of the book, he suggests that those who seek social change need to reclaim the "utopian impulse"—even for the sake of achieving moderate reform. But it is not clear that one can embrace a belief in radical change simply in order to achieve more limited goals. Nor is it evident that the real problem of the left today—especially in the wake of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street mobilization—is a lack of big dreams. Still, by advancing an interpretation of American history that places political radicalism at the center of the story, Kazin does a real service to those thinking about the history of social change.

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Catherine Corrigan-Brown, *Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements* (2012). Stanford University Press, \$45.00 (hardcover).

Bette Steinmuller, Nancy Teel, Beatrice Nava, Linda Stern, Steven Norris, & Kendall Hale, *Written Out of History: Memoirs of Ordinary Activists* (2011). Leapyear Press, \$15.00 (paperback).

On the heels of renewed activism, exemplified by the Occupy movement, academics and activists may want to know about the motivations and life courses of those who have devoted at least some portion of their lives to social and political causes. These two books—the first, a sociological examination of the career paths of self-defined activists and the second, first-person retrospective narratives by six political activists—provide a great deal of information.

Patterns of Protest carefully investigates various dimensions of political activists' lives, including the duration of their engagement, the strength of their activist identities, and the significance of social interactions within the social movement organizations (abbreviated as SMOs). The author employed a